California condor returns to Pinnacles National Monument

By Cicely Muldoon and Rebecca Leonard

Aside from geological and scenic interest, [Pinnacles National Monument] is important as one of the last strongholds and breeding places of the California condor.

—Guide to the National Monuments, ca. 1930

AFTER FOUR YEARS of planning, and four years short of the park's centennial, Pinnacles National Monument, in cooperation with the Ventana Wilderness Society and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has brought the California condor home. One adult and six juvenile condors resided in a newly constructed facility designed to house the birds while they became familiar with Pinnacles' rugged terrain. The young condors were hatched at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, housed at the Big Sur release site in central California for five months, and transferred to Pinnacles in mid-September 2003. The juvenile birds spent three months in the release facility with the adult mentor condor. Two of the juveniles were released on December 20, 2003, with four more following on January 5. By January 26, following the recapture of two condors that had been roosting on the ground and were vulnerable to predation, all six juveniles were flying free in the monument.

Park staff overcame many hurdles to return condors to this part of their historical range, including two environmental assessments, extended public review, and an unexpected relocation of the release site. Working through the logistics for the new release site, which included bringing water to a roadless area, carrying innumerable loads of construction materials up steep terrain, and working with neighboring landowners to construct an access trail across private property, slowed the project by more than a year. Fortunately, with the strong support of park neighbors and project partners, the return of the California condor to the park is back on track. Following the successful release of the first six California condors at Pinnacles, another cohort of juveniles will be transferred to the facility and held for release in fall 2004. The release program will continue over a projected 3- to 15-year period, depending upon how soon the goal of a wild population of 20–30 condors within the park is achieved.

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Staff's hopes that the park will be a viable release site are high. Park features bear promising names for the reintroduction—Condor Gulch, Condor Crags—and Pinnacles' craggy volcanic formations are excellent, historical condor nesting habitat. Condors are believed to have nested within the park until the 1930s, and the last confirmed condor sighting was in 1982. With the ability to fly more than 200 miles (322 km) a day, and with resident wild condors only 45 miles (72 km) away on the Big Sur coast, time will tell if the condors released at Pinnacles will once again take up residence in the rugged formations of the 24,000-acre (9,720-ha) park.

If successful, Pinnacles National Monument will be the most accessible of all the condor release sites and a destination for those hoping for a glimpse of one of the rarest and most notorious birds in the United States. The monument is only 100 miles (161 km) south of the greater San Francisco Bay Area, which has a burgeoning population in the millions. The park is located in the heart of San Benito County, however, one of the least populated and most rural counties in California. Large private ranchlands surround the park, and hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands are nearby. Park staff has worked hard to build understanding and support for the condor reintroduction program with neighboring landowners and surrounding communities through ongoing education and outreach.

A vulture with a 9.5-foot (2.9-m) wingspan, the California condor is the largest flying bird in North America. The juvenile birds warm their wings in the morning sun.

A successful condor reintroduction at Pinnacles will, of course, be only a piece of the larger strategy for recovery of this remarkable species, including numerous federal and state agencies, and private and nonprofit organizations. Release is just the first step in the ultimate success of the condor program. Once condors are again soaring over Pinnacles, they will face numerous hazards and challenges, both natural and human-related. Predators such as coyotes and golden

An adult condor named Hoi, distinguished by his pinkish-orange head and neck (above), lived with the six juvenile birds, teaching them skills needed for survival in the wild.

eagles pose a moderate risk to the birds' survival. Much greater is the danger posed by humans. The preeminent threat to condors is lead poisoning, caused by consumption of lead-contaminated carcasses or gut piles left behind by hunters. Few people are aware of the danger lead poses to condors, or of the solutions that could overcome these hazards. These threats can be mitigated through the use of lead-free ammunition or burying animal remains, and a comprehensive educational effort is a focus of all agencies and organizations engaged in the condor recovery program. Collision with utility lines is another danger to condors because they have difficulty seeing them. Small, inexpensive diverters have been used effectively in release areas to make the lines more visible. Despite these and other obstacles, successful recovery of the species is possible. Captive-bred condors fledged a chick this fall in the Grand Canyon, the first wild fledgling of this species in the wild since the mid-1980s, and a milestone in the overall condor recovery effort.

Ultimately, bringing the condors home to western North America will depend on an informed and engaged public committed to their return. The staff at Pinnacles welcomes the opportunity to serve as a critical link in the recovery effort. ■

cicely_muldoon@nps.gov
Superintendent, Pinnacles National Monument, California

rebecca_leonard@nps.gov
Biologist, Pinnacles National Monument, California

Reproduction of Canada lynx discovered in Yellowstone

By Tiffany Potter

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, has confirmed the presence of a female Canada lynx and her kitten in the central portion of the park. Staff members of the Yellowstone lynx project were jubilant when, with a snowstorm looming, they located snow tracks of a lynx and her cub on an extremely cold day (below –20° F, –29° C) in February 2003. A goal of the lynx project is to determine if Yellowstone has a resident population of this elusive animal, and this discovery suggests that the animals are resident rather than transient.

With more than 50 pounds of survival and tracking gear, biologists on skis followed the tracks for 2.2 miles (3.5 km), measuring tracks, taking plaster casts, and collecting hair and fecal samples for

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DNA analysis. Scientists at the University of Montana's Rocky Mountain Research Laboratory extracted DNA from the samples and identified the source of the hair and scat as lynx. The Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit has an agreement with the genetics laboratory to identify species and gender of forest carnivores from hair and scat samples submitted by the National Park Service. The presence of Canada lynx was first recorded from DNA from hair snared in summer 2001; however, questions remained as to whether lynx were visitors to or residents of Yellowstone.

This discovery is the first documented case of reproduction of lynx in Wyoming since 1998. In the summer, reproduction was also documented in six lynx females that were reintroduced to southwestern Colorado. These reproducing lynx represent an important success for this species, which is listed as threatened across its range in the contiguous United States. Scientists still have questions about the long-term survival of lynx offspring and their ability to be recruited into the population. Documenting a small population of lynx in Yellowstone could be an impetus for additional study. ■

tiffany_potter@nps.gov
Lead Biological Technician, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming